

A Journal From Africa

Stories from my year in college at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Ghana, West Africa in 1982, and my journey home there after 24 years.

ABOUT ME



Dennis Hunter

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FRIDAY, OCTOBER 12, 2012

A Day of Patience



Introducing 'Abdu'l Baha at Stanford University in 1912, University President David Starr Jordan said, "Abdu'l Baha will surely unite the East and the West, for He walks the mystical path with practical feet." Abdul Baha

once told a story about two little girls who were late to school, standing on the porch as it started to pour down rain. One asked the other, "Should we pray for the rain to stop, or should take our umbrellas and run?" The other replied, "I think we need to do both."

That's me, living in Kumasi in 1982 at just 20 years old. Efua who lived across the road loved me. Every time she saw me coming out the front door, she would run over and sit in my lap, and she'd tell me in Twi everything going on in her world. She could hardly contain her excitement about life. Her smile could cure any amount of homesickness, no matter how bad.

At the time this photograph was taken, we were in the middle of the darkest part of the military coup as dangerous events seemed to occur weekly; things I wouldn't dare write about to my parents back at home in the U.S.

One Sunday, I was sitting on the couch in the living room reading a book and dozing in the afternoon heat. It was quiet except for the yellow-headed lizards barking while they sunned themselves on the wall and magpies quarreling with each other in the trees. Occasionally people would walk by, and it was so quiet I could hear their conversations.

Then like the clap of thunder, machine guns went off nearby. At first it sounded like it was on the roof, but I heard the distinct ping of metal on stone inside the house. Three rounds had gone through the windows and over my head, hitting the far wall inside the house. The sound was from the empty shells bouncing on the marble floor.

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I threw myself to the floor and rolled under the couch as fast as I could. Sweat surfaced spontaneously all over my body. I could feel my scalp suddenly drenched and my back was soaked as my t-shirt clung to my skin. I found myself whispering a Baha'i prayer for travelers, "...holding fast to the cord of Thy love and I have committed myself wholly to Thy care and Thy protection."

Trucks of soldiers went flying by on the road, and the din of yelling and gunfire made it impossible to figure out what was happening. Were they coming into the house to round up ex-patriots? Were soldiers attempting to corral the march of protesting students again? I stayed as still as I could, hardly breathing for fear of making any sound. And as suddenly as it started, it stopped. It was completely silent again and after a few minutes the magpies started their arguing all over.

Half an hour later, the trucks sped by on the way back into town, but there was no sound of gunfire - only cheering. I laid back down on the cold marble floor and waited until they were gone.

Later that day, we heard that a preacher had spoken out against the military coup. He had fled his pulpit when the soldiers were tipped off, and they chased him onto the university campus. There was an understanding that the campus grounds were off-limits to the soldiers, but they captured him and took him back to *Kejetia* at the center of town, where they tied him to a stake and burned him in front of the crowd to teach them a lesson about disobedience.

I remember Uncle Ben telling us the news of soldiers stopping buses between Kumasi and Accra, and everyone was ordered to get down off the bus to go into the bush and carry 50 pound bags of cocoa on their backs to the road for distribution trucks to pick up. When Uncle Ben asked me what I would do in that situation, I was so naive that I told him I would immediately head to the American Embassy to report the soldiers. I was so young.

Despite the constant danger from the soldiers, I still had to go into Accra regularly because of my visa situation. The chaos in the Ministry of Immigration was so bad that I came into the country on a visitor's visa, because processing a student visa from abroad was impossible. However when I arrived in Ghana, the military had closed the universities because of student protests so my status was delayed. As a back up plan, I enrolled in a language college. I desperately needed the visa in order to have access to my bank account in Togo. Without it, I was stuck in the country with no money and no means of getting over the border. And that meant taking risks by traveling into Accra regularly in an attempt to complete the process.

Back then, the Ministry was like something out of a 1950's movie. Everything was done by hand. Onion skin paper for manual typewriters. Cardboard files stacked to the ceiling, full of dust and purple ink from the never-ending bureaucratic process of stamping approvals upon approvals.

My case was assigned to Patience. She was not. Patience was a wall of a woman, standing at least six feet tall and weighing 300 pounds. She had a burning hatred for her job, but not nearly as much as her hatred for people. Every time I went into the Ministry, waiting hours for my name to be called, my stomach would churn because of my fear of Patience. Everything in the Ministry was painted battleship green, and I remember laughing to myself because I thought that color must match the color of my stomach, as it boiled while I waited.

She would bellow at me, "Mr. Hunter, I'm sure you are not stupid! I distinctly told

you that the Headmaster of the school was supposed to initial three copies of the immigration annex form, and you have only submitted two to me! I TOLD YOU THREE COPIES! STOP WASTING MY TIME AND GET OUT OF MY OFFICE! NEXT!" I had written down exactly what she had requested from my last appointment with her - two copies of the immigration annex form, stapled in the upper left hand corner with one staple.

After the fifth or sixth trip to Accra risking my safety each time, I came home again to Kumasi empty handed. Nana sat me down and set me straight. He asked me if I knew what *kalabule* was and I told him no. *Kalabule* was the local slang term for corrupt business practices, such as smuggling and paying bribes in order to get things done. He told me I had to consider that Patience was purposely blocking the approval of my visa because she was expecting a bribe. I told Nana that as a Baha'i, I couldn't pay a bribe in order to get things done. I just couldn't do it. He told me then to consider giving her a gift of necessities, making sure that she understood what my intention was with the gift.

A friend had just come back from Togo with things I needed - six rolls of toilet paper, three tubes of toothpaste, and a dozen bars of soap. I would give Patience everything.

There was a young Baha'i named Lisa who was also living with the Asares, doing her Year of Service while going to secondary school at St. Louis Academy with Christine Asare. She was having the same problems with her visa, and she was assigned to a man named Mr. Opoku. Lisa was a pretty girl, so Nana and Christine helped Lisa devise a plan to get her visa stamped. The four of us went to Accra again. Christine and Lisa went into one of the bedrooms at the Baha'i Centre, and stayed there for an hour. Nana just grinned at me while we waited, refusing to tell me what they were up to.

They finally came out. Lisa had on a form-fitting red silk dress she had brought from Taipei when she had lived there previously. Christine had French-braided her hair so that it made a ponytail down one of her shoulders. She had red lipstick and eye shadow on. Lisa was going in for the kill.

The two of us got into a taxi as Nana and Christine wished us luck. They were heading back to Kumasi, because we were all under strict orders from Auntie Bea to stay out of danger and get home as soon as possible. Lisa and I would get on a bus as soon as we were done.

We both walked into the sick-green waiting room, and we waited for four hours until finally Lisa's name was called by Mr. Opoku. I think his eyes popped out of his head. "Well, hello Miss Lisa! How are you doing today?! You are looking so lovely!" He didn't shut his office door, so I got to watch. Lisa tilted her head, batted her eyes, and complimented Mr. Opoku as she hung on every word he said. She walked back out and winked at me, flashing me her visa he had stamped in her passport. I was up next.

Mr. Opoku then came out into the waiting room, seeing Lisa sitting next to me. He asked Lisa if I was related to her, and she said yes. He then announced my name as loud as he possibly could, "DEEEEEEE HUNTER!" He came up to me and asked me if, "Lisa's brother would follow him to Patience's office." I looked back at Lisa, trying not to laugh as Mr. Opoku escorted me down the hall. When I told this story to all my friends back in Kumasi, I never lived it down. Nana laughed so hard I thought he'd have a heart attack. To this day, Annie still calls me Dee.

I walked in and sat down. Patience just scowled at me for a while, as if I had

disrupted her entire life. I quietly said, "Sister Patience, I know things are hard in Ghana." I took out the six toilet paper rolls and stacked them in a pyramid on her desk. I continued, "I am sure you can appreciate my gifts." I lined up the three tubes of toothpaste in a neat row next to the toilet paper. "I know how hard you work, and I just want to acknowledge my appreciation." I stacked the bars of soap in a tidy pile. I said, "I really need your help so that I can continue my education here in Ghana." I sat back and stayed quiet. Either I was about to be arrested because she was a loyalist to the military coup, or she would take the gifts.

She continued to scowl, but I didn't move. I didn't even blink, partly because of the terror of not knowing what was about to happen. And after a few moments, she started to pick up each of the items and put them in her bottom desk drawer. She then sat for a moment, saying nothing - just glaring at me. She pulled open her top drawer, pulled out an ink pad and a rubber stamp, and pounded the stamp into my passport with enough force that she could have broken the desk. I had my visa.

I stood up and reached out my hand to thank her. She sat still and just stared back at me. I told her I thanked her for all her help as I grabbed my passport and headed for the door. I was sure she was going to change her mind so I had to get out of there as soon as I could. I met Lisa in the waiting room and grabbed her hand, and we ran out of the Ministry.

It was about 3:00, and we knew that if we didn't catch a bus in an hour, we would have to spend the night in Accra. We decided to take our chances and headed straight for Kwame Nkrumah Circle. We got lucky and our bus left at 3:45. We would make it home before the curfew at 9:00.

Or so we thought.

At 9:15, the bus rolled past the soldiers' barricade coming into Kumasi. The gate to the university was right there, so we were close to being home. As the bus stopped, we assumed that it was going to let passengers off who lived in Bomso and at the university campus. Instead, three soldiers all armed with machine guns got onto the bus, and pulled the bus driver and his porter out of their seats and onto the road. We heard yelling, and then one of the soldiers came back and told all of us to get down and line up on the side of the road. We did as we were told. That same soldier then started to yell at the bus driver about being late and violating the curfew. He screamed at him that the soldiers were going to teach him a lesson about being late.

The soldiers pulled out leather covered billy clubs, and one by one beat each passenger on their shoulders and back until they dropped to their knees, screaming and crying in pain - men, women and children. I turned to Lisa and whispered, "Start praying because we have about three minutes until they get to us, and they are going to beat us to a pulp." We stood and quietly said a Baha'i prayer, "Is there any remover of difficulties save God? Say, praise be God, He is God. All are His servants and all abide by His bidding."

Out of nowhere, a small hatchback car screeched to a stop directly in front of Lisa and me. The passenger door flew open and we heard a voice yell, "GET IN!" We had nothing to lose, so we both ran for the car and jumped in. The car made a wild left turn while its wheels skidded and smoked as the driver gunned the engine. He sped through the university gate and onto the campus, barely maintaining control of the car. There was no way for the soldiers to follow us because they were stationed at the barricade without vehicles.

We were safe.

I caught my breath and turned to look at the face of the man who rescued us. It was our next door neighbor on Ridge Road at the campus. Lisa and I looked at each other with disbelief. We didn't say a word as we drove home. He dropped us off and we thanked him for saving our lives. I told him we owe him a great debt, but he told us just to be careful and stay close to home. Auntie Bea and Uncle Ben were up waiting for us. We reassured them that we were OK, and after a cup of tea we all went to bed. But I didn't sleep that night; neither did Lisa. We both laid awake, wondering what happened after we were rescued.

Sometimes I still lay awake at night, thinking of those people being beaten. Their faces are burned into my memory, images of them falling to their knees with tears streaming down their faces. I lay in the dark and wonder if their feelings about their country changed or after all these years, were they able to forget about that night. And I wonder about the soldiers. Do they look back and think about what they did during a moment of intoxication from power? Do they see the faces of those people in the faces of their own parents, wives and children?

And I lay awake, thinking about the incredible circumstances which allowed Lisa and I to escape.

People will deny the existence of God and faith, or they'll discredit the reality of what may simply be unseen. But that night, I know in my heart that something out there protected Lisa and me. I have no explanation for it, but it was real.

Baha'is believe in the Concourse on High. The Akan people call them the Ancestors. Others may call them angels. They are the souls of our loved ones who have passed on to the next world, inspiring everything that is good in humanity here on earth. They also watch out for us when we ask for their help. I know they are there.

Posted by Dennis Hunter at 9:12 PM No comments:

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THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 2012

A Wedding Gift

One morning summer before last, I was eating my koko porridge made from corn, and my mangoes and avocado for breakfast in solitude, which is the traditional way.

The head of the household and adult guests are given the greatest honor by being served at their own solitary table, apart from the rest of the family members. In villages, the extended family lives together communally, which can include 50 or 60 people. One expression of respect is to provide a space for silence and peace while eating. Uncle Prince provides this to me as a gesture of his love for me as his son and as his guest.

Just as I was finishing my meal, I heard the footsteps of several people walking along the pathway to the courtyard door. I walked Uncle Alex Sr., Alex Jr. and Sammy. Usually the boys would arrive in the morning to pick me up to get to



work on our efforts with the Baha'i communities in Brafoyaw, Yamoransa and Abakrampa, so I knew this visit was special because Uncle Alex Sr. had accompanied them.

"Yaw, I'd like to ask you to pay me a great honor and come to the wedding of my nephew Charles next Sunday," he asked me.

I replied, "Uncle Alex, I would be honored to accompany the family, but all I have with me is t-shirts, shorts and jeans. I didn't bring my suit."

Uncle Alex Sr. said in a very matter of fact way, "Yaw, you are family. You will attend and you will wear traditional cloth. The whole family is going and it won't be the same without you."

I was shocked. For an *obruni* to be asked to wear cloth is unheard of. Three years prior to this, Uncle Prince had told me I was accepted as a Fante, and now I was seeing exactly what he meant by that. I was one of the people and my family knew that I was comfortable in the culture. I was obviously anxious, but after some insistence from Uncle Alex Sr. I accepted. Alex Jr. and Sammy were ecstatic. Uncle Prince went to his room and came back with a beautiful piece of cloth. He couldn't attend the wedding because of a family commitment of his own, so he told me I will wear his cloth. He told me this is wedding cloth. It is woven like kente, but the colors were white, taupe, light green, light blue and gold threads throughout the weave. It was beautifully made by hand, and clearly a precious possession of Uncle Prince.

Sunday morning arrived, and I took my morning bath. In the village, bathing happens twice a day; once before going to bed and then first thing in the morning as we rise. A large bucket is filled with rain water and placed in the center of a tiled room that resembles a shower. A ladle is used to soak the body, and then a sponge of woven netting is used with soap to scrub the body. Some days it was cold in the morning, and Uncle Prince would get up early to heat water for me so that my bath was comfortable.

Alex Jr. and Sammy arrived early to help dress me. The boys brought a beautiful Ghanaian gold necklace for me to wear, since the custom among the Akan is to display gold whenever traditional cloth is worn. Alex also gave me my gift of my *ahenema*, which are traditional handmade sandals.

The boys explained that the cloth I was to wear was very indicative of tradition because it is mostly white and the other colors are muted, and the patterns of



the proverbs are absent in the weave, just stripes. The reason for this is so that as a guest of the wedding, I wouldn't be a distraction from the beauty of the bride. Alex Jr. wore a piece of light blue and white cloth and Sammy wore a piece of green, brown and white cloth.

The next step was to wrap my cloth. The boys told me to put on pair of khaki shorts. I ran into my room and changed, and came out into the courtyard. Araba, Paa Kwesi, Akukua, Uncle Prince and Auntie Aggie stood and watched as the boys went to work.

"*Wofa*, put your arms straight out like a cross," Sammy said.

Alex Jr. said, "Hold the cloth in each hand across your back, *Wofa Yaw*. That's it! Now watch as I hang the cloth over your left arm." I glanced over and caught Uncle Prince's eye. He was beaming.

Sammy took the cloth from my right hand and said, "Keep your arm up while I tuck the cloth under it. Now we throw the cloth across your chest and over your left shoulder, like this!"

The boys worked and fussed their way around me, throwing and folding the cloth laying on my outstretched left arm so that it stacked on top of my left shoulder.

Alex Jr. said, "Use your left hand to wrap and hold the cloth across your waist to hide your shorts."

The boys then helped me slip on my *ahenema*, explaining to me that I am only to wear them on special occasions when I have my cloth on.

Being dressed this way was so moving and so personal to me. It was one of the first times in my life that I felt like I belonged. It felt familiar, and at the same time it felt incredibly profound. This tradition had been observed for thousands of years and I was now experiencing it for myself, part of a rich and beautiful history and part of my family. Alex Jr. and Sammy stood back to take it all in, both of them smiling and telling me, "*Wofa Yaw, wo ho ye fe papaapa!*" "Uncle Yaw, you are very handsome!"

During the weeks leading up to this morning, beautiful ceremonial rites had been carried out between the families of Charles and his bride. These customs are so revered in the Akan cultures that even under the law, before a marriage can be registered, the couple must perform the rites.

Traditionally, the couple will meet during a period known as the "*Kasasie*", or the period of "The Speaking," getting to know each other and to establish the intention to marry. The man will then tell his mother, and the mother will speak with her son about the woman, her background and her family's background. The mother will then either attempt to discourage her son if she feels it is not a

good match, or she will go to speak to his father on his behalf. If the father agrees, the family will then start a formal investigation of the woman's character and family to confirm the suitability of the couple.

Before a man can ask for a woman's hand in marriage, he has to be introduced to the woman's family formally as a gesture of his intention to establish courtship and marriage. This ceremony is called the "*Kokoo ko*" or "*Aponoakyibo*," or "The Knocking." The man traditionally stays home and prominent male members of his family, such as his father, uncle or grandfather go to the woman's house and present an offering of beverages to the woman's father, while stating their intention. A date is set between the parties following The Knocking when the man's family will return to inquire about the dowry, or "Bride Price." If the woman's father drinks one of the beverages offered, it is an acknowledgement that his daughter is now spoken for and the couple is recognized publicly as dating. Dating is not understood in the same manner that we would understand it. It means that the entire family is in the process of "dating" and getting acquainted, confirming that the couple are well suited for each other since marriage is not only between two individuals, but a joining of two entire families. During this time the woman's family will make serious inquiries about the man's family, including financial status, background in the community, their treatment of women and even inheritable diseases which may run in the family such as sickle cell anemia.

In the Baha'i Faith, we also believe that marriage is the joining of two families, and the groom and bride must receive the consent of their parents in order for the marriage to happen. It makes sense, since parents can assist in providing some objectivity and perspective from their experience.

If the woman's family is satisfied with the background, they then submit "The List" to the man's family, which are all the items that will be required to fulfill the dowry. If they are not satisfied, they will return the beverages and provide a suitable reason as to why the match is not possible. Customary items in The List include six full pieces of traditional wax print cloth, pots, pans, sheets, towels, blankets and most importantly the "*Akonta Sikan*" or "Brother-in-laws' Cutlass." Traditionally this would be a knife given to the brothers of the bride as a symbol of compensation for the loss of their sister. Common practice today is for the *Akonta Sikan* to be given in the form of monetary compensation.

Now, this is where it gets fun. The morning of the wedding, the whole family of the groom brings the items fulfilling The List to the door of the bride's family's house. There is an "*Okyeame*" or spokesperson for each of the families. The groom's *Okyeame* will speak eloquently of each of the items, saying things like, "This kente cloth is not just any kente cloth, we walked all the way to Bonwire which is the birthplace of kente. It was woven by the royal weaver to the *Asantehene*, the King, and the patterns tell proverbs that reflect the beauty and humility of the bride!" In turn, the bride's *Okyeame*, often her elder sister, will dismiss the offering by replying, "This cloth is is not made well at all, and its thread is of poor quality! Are you stating that the bride is of poor quality? You must leave at once!" This friendly banter is carried out with great humor, and is also a distraction so that the bride's family can sneak the bride's wedding party to the place of the ceremony. After a while, the banter stops and the bride's *Okyeame* gives up, allowing the groom and his party to enter the house and then continue on to the venue of the wedding.

Charles' wedding ceremony was held at a Catholic church in the center of Cape Coast, with a formal Mass prior to the ceremony. Uncle Alex Sr. drove us all that morning. We were all dressed in traditional cloth except for Alex Jr.'s younger brother Ernest-Cobbah who wore western clothing, as is the custom with

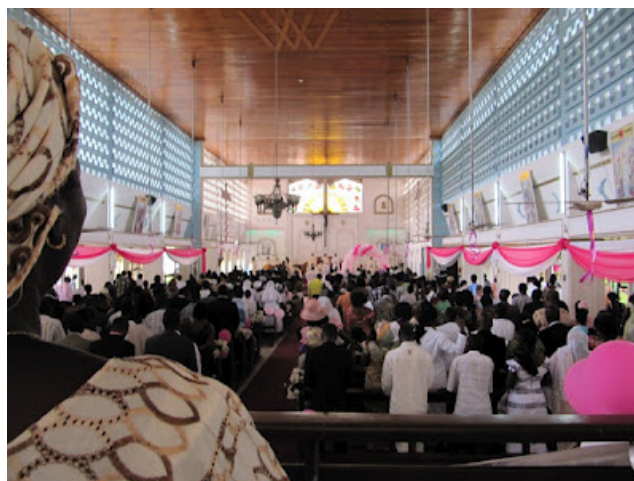
younger people. Auntie Gladys, Alex Jr.'s mother, was dressed beautifully in her *kabbah*, skirt and apron.



The church was packed with 400 people. We arrived and sat at the back of the church, while Uncle Alex Sr. and Auntie Gladys went up to sit with the family elders. The Mass was beautiful, and reminded me of my childhood going to Mass with my mother. The bride and groom walked in with their families in procession down the center aisle, dressed in western suits and gowns of white and pink. Charles was so happy!

After the couple exchanged their vows and rings at the end of the Mass, suddenly the 5 rows in the front of the church stood up. They were dressed in the same pattern of wax print cloth. They were the traditional drummers, the band and the choir; the church exploded with music and song in Fante. Everyone stood up, and started dancing and clapping. It was amazing. We all experience the spirit of God in different ways, and this was one of them. The songs were beautiful; the drumming and the band was incredible. It felt like my feet could have lifted off the carpet and I could have flown right out the clerestory of the church.

Alex and Sammy grabbed me. I almost had to shout, "Where are we going?!" Alex yelled back, "*Bra!* Come! We are going to dance, come on!" We made our way down to the aisle in a sea of people, everyone singing, clapping and dancing.



"*Bra!* We need to help the Charles and his bride! Take out a few cedis and follow me!" Alex yelled and we made our way into a queue of people in the center aisle. There I was in my traditional wedding cloth, dancing down the center aisle of the church and I was the only *obruni* there. The families were

overjoyed, patting me on the back as I made my way up the aisle to a box that everyone was dropping money into for the couple to set up their home during their first few weeks. One of the drummers stopped and held both his hands up to me, letting me know how honored he was that I was part of the family and dressed in my cloth.

The music and drums kept up, and the couple and their families danced their way out the doors of the church, outside for pictures. Charles loves to dance, and he looked so proud strutting and spinning with his new wife on his arm. We all followed, dancing in procession. When I got outside, I just stood and took it all in. I was speechless.



This day was a gift. I was brought into this incredible experience as a member of the family, and I will never forget it. It was that day that I realized what Uncle Prince told me, "I think God made a small error and you were born in the wrong place, but isn't it a wonderful blessing that He has helped you find your way home to us. Home to your family."

One of my favorite writers is Karen Blixen who took the pen name Isak Dinesen. She wrote "Out of Africa" and "Shadows on the Grass", her memoirs of living in Kenya in the early 1900's. Much of what she wrote was about how profoundly her identity changed from the impact of living in Africa.

"If I know a song of Africa, of the giraffe and the African new moon lying on her back, of the plows in the fields and the sweaty faces of the coffee pickers, does Africa know a song of me? Will the air over the plain quiver with a color that I have had on, or the children invent a game in which my name is, or the full moon throw a shadow over the gravel of the drive that was like me, or will the eagles of the Ngong Hills look out for me?" -- Karen Blixen, 1937

This is a question that stays with all of us who were not born on the African continent, but were blessed to have the opportunity to live there. It is such a profoundly moving experience which redefines everything we are and what we believe in. But the question that remains in our hearts is whether or not our lives will have had any significance to Africa.

I think of this often as I reflect on this life of mine and as I learn the customs of my Fante people. And I wonder - will I have an impact, even a small one, on their lives?

I pray for this every day.

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 18, 2012

My Son, My Mirror



I just returned from a month in Ghana after making my Baha'i Pilgrimage, and I knew my next entry would be about my son Samuel. For some reason, this story was a challenge to write. And during a moment of meditation at the Shrine of Baha'u'llah, the resting place of the Founder of the Baha'i Faith, the reasons appeared to me.

I love my son Alex because I see in him the person I am striving to become - positive, quietly confirmed in his faith, optimistic, outgoing and engaging, always giving of himself, and always gracious and humble to accept of the assistance of others. My love for Sammy is just as strong, but manifests

itself differently. In Sammy I see so much of myself and I realized that much of each of our characters was defined by growing up in broken families.

Alex grew up with the security a mother and father who expected the best from their children, but also showered them with love and gave them a solid foundation to fall back on as they navigate their way into adulthood.

Sammy and I did not.

Sammy was raised by his mother, but his father left when Sammy was 12 years old. Sammy's primary father figure was Uncle Alex Sr., Alex's biological father. In the Akan cultures, remember that the name in Twi for "father" and "father's brother" are the same word, and this manifests itself in the culture such that the brothers and sisters of biological parents step into the role of father and mother to all children in the extended family.

But with Sammy's father leaving, he was suddenly required to grow up quickly and take on many of the responsibilities that a father would in a family of 11 children. My

experience was similar, surviving my parents' divorce when I was 17 and suddenly responsible for the upbringing of my younger brother.

Our parents did the best they could with the capacities they had available to them, and Sammy and I have discussed this in depth. We both have been able to support each other in finding a path to forgiveness, acceptance and unconditional love for our parents.

The result of such an upbringing is profound. We tend to be loners, we are comfortable with solitude, we have a fear of failure which makes it hard for us to pursue our interests and passions in life, and we have a hard time accepting help from others when it's offered. We are caught in a world of survival.

A husband leaving his wife and family was a rarity in Ghana when I lived there in 1982. Thirty years ago, traditions were much more intact. Marriage was seen as an institution for providing the means to raise a family, and building a secure foundation for family members including the extended family in that foundation. Culturally, careful steps were in place to ensure that through the process of courtship and engagement the couple was assisted by parents and grandparents to assess each character, compatibility of each individual and the compatibility of the families that would be joined in the union.

This foundation for a family manifested itself in different ways. The eldest living member of a family is given the responsibility to sort out quarrels and disputes and family members abide by an unwritten contract which they believe is enforced by the *Nananom Nsamamfo*, who are the Ancestors in the next world. *Juju*, or magic, is also a powerful part of the belief system, whereby cause and effect on a spiritual level play a part in everyone's lives. If you do harm to another person, there will be repercussions on a metaphysical level.

One of my most cherished interests is in the Akan proverbs which also assist in keeping the bonds of marriage and family strong. When I was a student at KNUST, I had the opportunity to sit with a fetish priestess and discuss the proverbs with her. Typically, the grandmothers of the family are charged with the responsibility of providing advice, often using the proverbs. The following are just a few of these beautiful gems of wisdom:

- *Nea oforo dua pa na wopia no*. The one who climbs a good tree is the one who is helped. (Well-thought plans will bring others who will want to assist you.)
- *Nea wonom ho no wonnware ho*. One should not bathe in the water others drink. (Do what is right, not what is convenient.)
- *Onipa ye de*. Mankind is sweet (No man should live in isolation.)

The origins of the proverbs are not known. The earliest western account of them appears to be by a British explorer named Mary Kingsley in the late 1800's. It can be deduced that if the history of Okomfo Anokye takes place during the late 1600's, the proverbs are at least that old. Okomfo Anokye was one of Alex's mother's people, the Nzima, who come from the coast of Ghana further west of Takoradi near the border of Cote d'Ivoire. It is believed that he was a priest who had supernatural powers, and was responsible for having brought down the Golden Stool from the gods in the heavens to the Asante people, which resulted in a constitution and a federation among all of the Akan peoples. My own personal feeling is that he was a Manifestation of God, and the golden stool is symbolic of knowledge from God which every Manifestation has brought in his teachings to further the progress of mankind. The proverbs also reflect this divine wisdom.

Ghana has experienced political stability and economic growth ranging from 10% to 14% each year for the last 25 years, the country has also experienced a shift in cultural traditions as young people become focused on western values. The result has been a fracturing of the extended family and a weakening of the traditional value system which provided structural integrity to communities. So many children living in the cities are not aware of the proverbs, and their grandparents are increasingly becoming expendable

rather than the moral anchor of the family.

And along with westernization has come a western perspective on relationships. Rather than the cultural norm of being a community member first and an individual second, people are becoming more accustomed to leaving a tough situation rather than trying to make it work for the greater good. And with the safety net of grandparents and the extended family disintegrating, assistance is also disappearing. Sammy experienced this when his father moved to Moree. I experienced this when I was 17.

Two years ago, I started to get phone calls from Alex who was very scared. He told me that Sammy had disappeared and no one knew where he was at. Sammy would return after a few months, but would say nothing about where he had been and what he was doing. And after a couple months he would disappear again. I tried to talk to Sammy about this, but he would not open up to me.

So last year, I sat Sammy down outside the wall surrounding Uncle Prince's house just above the valley the house overlooks. It was strangely quiet that day, only the breeze blowing through the valley and the hawks lazily soaring in circles over the silk cotton trees.



"Sammy, you know I love you with the love of a father that you never had. I want to help, but if you can't tell me what is troubling you, we can't come up with a solution. So I am here to listen. No advice unless you want it. No judgment. No criticism. Just to listen."

Sammy looked at me, and then took a leap of faith and trust with me. He told me that he had originally saved money from welding jobs in order to build a welding shop with his best friend. His friend swindled him out of the land purchase and he lost everything he had saved. His mother had been pressuring him since he was now 22, to bring money home and support his brothers and sisters. Her pressure became so great that he had to leave home and go to the gold mines to work hard labor digging in the mines in order to earn some small amount of money to bring home, and buy some time until his mother's pressure started again. This cycle continued for another year, and Sammy had become quiet and sullen. The spark in his eye was nowhere to be found, and his wonderful humor that makes everyone laugh was gone.

We had been visiting a friend named Danquah in Yamoransa regularly. He owns a computer repair shop, and he was always busy with customers bringing their PCs for repair. Danquah was open to talking about what Baha'is believe in, so Sammy, Alex, Uncle Prince and I would go visit him a couple days a week and discuss world events and what the Baha'is believe are the solutions to these problems. And every time we would visit, Sammy inevitably ended up looking over Danquah's shoulder, fascinated with what he was doing.

I asked Sammy if he was interested in computers. He looked at me in shock. "How did you know, Wofa Yaw?" I told him I had been watching every day we went to the shop, and it was clear that he had a passion for them. After I pointed out to Sammy that his disappearing was a short term solution that would not resolve the long term situation, I asked Sammy if he wanted to go to school to study computers in order to have a viable trade so that one day he can get married and have a family of his own.

Sammy was stunned. He responded, "But Wofa Yaw, I can't..." I told Sammy that rule number one in our relationship is that we will never say 'I can't' to each other. This was particularly hard for me to say to him because I see that quality in myself, always cautious and always afraid that the worst that could happen. But as a father, I couldn't show him my fear. My job was to provide a foundation for him to leap off of, and ensure that he was safe in doing so.

Sammy revealed to me that with his father's leaving, so did any hope to go to secondary school because of financial reasons. Sammy had no education and no future. He was backed into a corner and giving up. And it was a shameful experience for him to be so stuck in life, like being trapped in adolescence while watching your friends move on, never allowed to fully grow up and never allowed to be entitled to a future. I think my heart broke, sitting there and looking out at the valley. No child should ever be limited by circumstances, deprived of a future and deprived of having hopes and dreams.

I told Sammy not to worry about that right now, and that together we will get this all sorted out. I told him that he has my commitment as a father which was witnessed by the Ancestors, and since the Ancestors sent him as my gift of my son, that I will never let him fall again and that we will see through this together. Sammy promised to work on making a plan.

Soon, Sammy found an introductory certificate program at one of the computer schools in Cape Coast that did not require a secondary school certificate. We agreed that this was the first step, and that we should pray for doors to continue to open. Soon Sammy was in school, and enjoying every minute of it. And he discovered he was a good student. In fact so good, that one of his teachers hired him to work as an intern at his repair shop last summer. Sammy later got accepted into a prominent computer college in Accra where he has been able to arrange with the college for him to complete his secondary school certificate along side his three year program in computer network maintenance.

One of the most profound Akan proverbs is *Se wo were fi na wo san kofa a yenkyi*. This means, "It is not taboo to return and take what you have forgotten." Sammy is doing just that, cleaning up his past and going back to collect what is rightfully his.

What brings me the greatest joy is that during my last trip to Ghana this summer, my happy son Sammy was back. Alex, Sammy and I went to visit a friend of mine in Accra, where we stayed a couple of days. One morning I woke up early, so I walked into the boys room to check on them. They were awake, but not out of bed yet. I sat at the end of Sammy's bed and the three of us talked and laughed. It was one of those small moments that I wish I could stop time and live in that moment for a lifetime.

The first week that Sammy went to classes at his new college in Accra, I called him to check on him and see how things are going. The excitement in his voice was palpable. I said, "It's one thing for me to be excited about something, but it's a bigger thing for me to be excited for someone, and I am so excited for you." Sammy said back, "I love you too, Papa."

Posted by Dennis Hunter at 10:58 PM No comments:

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The Nananom Nsamanfo Are Our Ancestors



One of the reasons why I came to the conclusion that the Baha'i Faith was what I had been searching for was the concept of Progressive Revelation.

What this means is that God being the Supreme

Being, is unknowable to us. In order to educate us about our spiritual reality, He sends educators who teach us about who we are and how we relate to each other. As mankind has progressed, we have been able to grasp increasingly complex concepts, including life after death, the soul and our purpose for being here on earth. In one Baha'i prayer, it is said "I bear witness, oh my God that thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee." We are given guidance through these teachers - or Manifestations - sent by God to mankind about every 1,000 years and our responsibility is to grasp these teachings. In Judeo-Christian religious history, these Manifestations are known as Adam, Abraham, Moses and Jesus Christ. Just as we learned as children in school, each class level brought more complex studies. So is it with each Manifestation, each bringing more complex information about our spiritual nature than the previous Manifestation. This is because at the time each appeared on earth, mankind had in his development was ready for the new teachings. Additionally, we believe that in the written history of religion there were other Manifestations such as Zoroaster, Krishna, Buddha and Muhammad, all voice pieces for the unknowable God.

Baha'is also believe that the latest Manifestation who also fulfills the promises of every religion in the past has appeared and brought new teachings to unite mankind. His name is Baha'u'llah and he lived during the 1800's, persecuted for teaching about the oneness of mankind, the oneness of religion - Progressive Revelation as I described above, the equality of men and women, the harmony between science/reason and religion, the establishment of world peace, compulsory education for all children on earth, harmony among all races and respect for all diverse cultures. For teaching this, He was imprisoned, persecuted, expelled from his country and lived a life in prison.

Now, what happened in Africa and other parts of the world without recorded histories? Remember my discussion about the linguist in the villages? Oral tradition is sacred in all African cultures, so there is a recorded history but just not written down. The eloquence of the spoken word is revered, and the linguist and the elder women are entrusted with helping to keep the history of generations upon generations of the people.

As an example, in 1982 I came across an American woman who came to Ghana with her family Bible. It had the name *Dadzie* (a Fante name) and the descendants of that name in America, as well as the name of a family village northeast of Cape Coast in Ghana. Her family had been sold into slavery at the

Cape Coast Castle, and her American ancestors had carefully kept these two pieces of information hidden for safe keeping.

The elder women in the villages memorize the family genealogy histories, carefully keeping track of each generation of the family - every name, every marriage, every child's birth and every story. This American woman found the family village and was able to make the connection when the family was captured and taken away by comparing the information she had with the memorized genealogical history kept by the elders in the village. She resembled many of the family members and was welcomed back into the family. She flew back to Virginia, packed up her two boys, and moved to Ghana where she lives with her family today.

While I was a student at KNUST, I studied the complexity of the traditional religion among the Akan peoples. I came to the conclusion that it would be foolish to believe that the continent of Africa had not been blessed with Manifestations of its own. Their traditional beliefs must have come from Manifestations of God, just the same way that Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism came to the rest of the world. There is no way that man could have formed these complex societies or value systems. There is no way that man could have perfected a moral code to live by that has survived for thousands of years, based on honesty, forbearance, humility, peace and faith.

The traditional religion is so complex that it is divided into a hierarchy in order to describe the attributes of God and God's relationship to man. At the highest level there is the Supreme Being - one God just like what we westerners believe in. The Akan see everything in terms of balance, and describe God as being both *Nyame* or the Great God Father and *Nyamewaa* the Great Goddess Mother. These are aspects of God not to be mistaken as deities.

Below that, there is the *Abosom*, labeled by westerners as being "lesser gods." But on closer examination, they are allegories for the various attributes of God - and I think they may have been Manifestations, since each has a spiritual teaching that is attached to their histories. There are many, such as:

- Nana Akonedi whose shrine is at Larteh Sublease. She hands out justice and gives the final decision in all societal disputes such as those related to the chieftancy, property and family disputes.
- Nana Asuo Gyebi who is a protector and a great healer.
- Nana Esi Ketewaa who is an ancestor who died while giving birth. She is a Fante who protects children and women during childbirth. She states that we are all her children.
- Nana Adade Kofi who stands for strength. His sword is used to swear oaths of allegiance.
- Tano, several gods who come from the Tano river. They are healers of spiritual, mental and physical illnesses.
- Nana Obo Kwesi, another Fante. He is a healer and works to fight those that do evil.

Under the *Abosom* are the *Nananom Nsamanfo*. They are our Ancestors who were people who had lived honorable lives, and because of their contribution to society they are given the station of Ancestor in the next world after the body dies and the soul passes on to being one step closer to the Creator.

Baha'is believe in the exact same concept. Part of our reality is our soul. It is indestructible and is separate from the physical body. We believe that the soul travels on to the next world of God after this one, leaving the physical body behind when we die. Here's a passage from the Baha'i Writings that I

particularly treasure:

"And now concerning thy question regarding the soul of man and its survival after death. Know thou of a truth that the soul, after its separation from the body, will continue to progress until it attaineth the presence of God, in a state and condition which neither the revolution of ages and centuries, nor the changes and chances of this world, can alter. It will endure as long as the Kingdom of God, His sovereignty, His dominion and power will endure. It will manifest the signs of God and His attributes, and will reveal His loving kindness and bounty. The movement of My Pen is stilled when it attempteth to befittingly describe the loftiness and glory of so exalted a station. The honor with which the Hand of Mercy will invest the soul is such as no tongue can adequately reveal, nor any other earthly agency describe. Blessed is the soul which, at the hour of its separation from the body, is sanctified from the vain imaginings of the peoples of the world. Such a soul liveth and moveth in accordance with the Will of its Creator, and entereth the all-highest Paradise. The Maids of Heaven, inmates of the loftiest mansions, will circle around it, and the Prophets of God and His chosen ones will seek its companionship. With them that soul will freely converse, and will recount unto them that which it hath been made to endure in the path of God, the Lord of all worlds. If any man be told that which hath been ordained for such a soul in the worlds of God, the Lord of the throne on high and of earth below, his whole being will instantly blaze out in his great longing to attain that most exalted, that sanctified and resplendent station." -- Baha'u'llah, Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah, p. 155

We believe that the souls of all of our loved ones who have passed on from this world will be there in the next world, ready to receive us. It is a better place than this one, free of pain and anguish. Our station in that world will be dependent on what we accomplish through good deeds in this world. We also believe that the souls who have passed on watch out for us, and have the capability to intercede on our behalf to assist us with our prayers. I often ask my grandmother who has passed on to help out when I'm praying to get through difficulty.

We don't believe in the concept of physical hell, as this was an allegory told to mankind during mankind's infancy - as one would tell a story to a child in order to understand a complex concept. Hell is a state of being, not a place.

The next part of this story requires an open mind. Believe me, I'm not the "hocus-pocus" kind of person. I'm sharing these experiences and ultimately I have no explanation for them.

The day my grandmother passed away when I was young, I was at home waiting for the phone call. Her death was inevitable because she had had a severe heart attack and would not recover. She asked that my brothers and I not stay at the hospital. I remember standing in the shower, and a feeling overcame me that I knew she was in the room with me. It was that same familiarity when we walk into an old friend's or family member's home, and we can feel their familiar presence. I had been asking God what I was going to do without her, because she was always the one who looked out for me. Right then, I felt what I can only describe as my grandmother's soul passing through me, and I felt pressure in my right hand like her hand grabbing mine. Then I heard inside my head, "Baby, it's going to be alright. It's going to be just fine, don't you worry. I will always be here when you need me, never far away."

I've found that these kinds of events are actually common, having spoken to many people who've said they've also had dreams of loved ones who have passed on, but the dreams are so vivid that they could swear their loved one was there with them.

Uncle Prince had explained to me that the Fante belief that the Ancestors watch out for us to keep balance in our lives. They are there in the next world to protect us, to keep us safe from harm and to guide us on the right path. It amazes me that people will dismiss the traditional beliefs of Africa because they are simply not familiar with them. If they were to look with an open mind and an open heart, they would find incredible commonality with their own beliefs.

I had mentioned that Nana had visited me in a dream. It wasn't an isolated event. He continued to visit me many times. My feelings associated with these dreams were conflicting because as much as it was great to be with this friend of mine as the years have gone by and my life in Ghana becomes more and more dear to me, my sense of guilt for having let Nana down also magnified.

I spoke to a wonderful woman named Julie Walker about all of this. Julie is a unique and gifted person. She calls herself an intuitive, and she is incredibly sensitive to all things spiritual. At first I was apprehensive, but having spent time with Julie on more than one occasion, I became open to her advice. I shared with her what had been happening with these dreams, and she told me that I was not recognizing two things. One, Nana had already forgiven me; and two, Nana was also laying down the pathway for me to ask for forgiveness and for him to acknowledge it. So she told me that when I got home that night to change all my bedding, take a shower and be spotlessly clean, wear clean sleeping clothes to bed, and in my prayers I was to not only ask Nana to come visit me, but also ask for his forgiveness and give me an irrefutable sign that he had understood and accepted my apology.

I did just that, and I fell hard asleep that night. Then I dreamed that I was standing at the opening to a huge train tunnel carved into the side of a mountain on the coast, above a cliff with waves crashing against the rocks below. I stood there knowing I was supposed to wait for something to happen. Then the tunnel started to become dimly lit, and then steadily brighter. The light got so strong that it was as bright as the sun, but it was a silvery white color and it didn't hurt to look at it. It radiated like a star and it was beautiful. In the center of the light, Nana walked out and stood in front of me. I recall that we talked, but I couldn't hear what was being said. He was happy - it was the joy that comes from being at peace. He smiled, and I felt that everything was going to be alright. And then I woke up.

Normally, I am the kind of person who struggles to wake up from sleep. Don't talk to me, don't look at me, just let me wake up in my own time. But this time, I was effortlessly wide awake and I sat straight up in bed. It was dark, but I felt like I had had a full night's sleep and I was supposed to be getting up. I turned to check my iPhone docking station to check the time on the phone. It wasn't 2:51AM. It wasn't 3:04AM. It was exactly 3:00AM. And on the cover of the phone was a text message. It was from Akwasi Osei. *"Yaw, good morning. Hope all is well. Greetings and love."*

Akwasi Osei is old school. He never text messages me. I sat there staring at the phone, trying to figure out why on earth out of nowhere he would send this text at this time. Then it hit me. An irrefutable sign. We were known in Ghana as The Three Musketeers or The Three. Nana had let me know all was forgiven, but I think he was also telling me that he's doing alright and that I have a responsibility to now take care of my brother Awasi Osei because Nana has passed on and Akwasi and I are still here in this world.

Akwasi and I are part of The Three. The Three are still together and always will be. Imagine that. Nana and I both fell off our paths in life. We lost focus. Who

can say that they have a friend who would move heaven and earth to help save our lives? I know I can say that.

The Ancestors are revered and feared among the Akan, but they are also dearly loved and cherished. They protect us, they change the course of life to bring us back to happiness. They work to put balance in our lives so that we are at peace. Nana is part of my Ancestors now and my life is so blessed because of it. I have a home in Ghana. I have my Fante people who give me strength and guide me through life. I have more love than most people can only hope for. And I have my two sons that the Ancestors have blessed me with.

The *Nananom Nsamanfo* are our Ancestors.

Posted by Dennis Hunter at 10:05 AM No comments:

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SUNDAY, JULY 8, 2012

On Becoming a Father



The day after I got settled in at Uncle Prince's house and I had gotten some rest, it was time to get to work.

The Baha'i community throughout the world sees that there are two dynamics happening in the world. One is the disintegration of the old order of the world, whereby nationalism, religious prejudice, racial prejudice, gender persecution and rampant materialism are destroying the fabric of society all over the earth.

The other dynamic happening in the world is the building of a new order based on a global awareness, where all prejudices are destroyed through education and a commitment to humanity, where the differences among cultures are appreciated and cherished, and where the consciousness of mankind is shifting to a concern for the community rather than the individual self.

Something the Baha'i communities throughout the world have done is to work at the grass roots level to create awareness about community service and a commitment to local neighborhoods. One project is to gather young people - junior youth between the ages of about 11 to 15 - to start their own neighborhood group which they run with the guidance of older people, but the junior youth "own" their group and make decisions about what they would like to do which includes service projects in their communities. These groups are strictly non-denominational and are service-based rather than religious-based. All children, regardless of background, are welcome to join and take part in the group.

Accomplishments include projects such as cleaning up trash on the sidewalks of their neighborhoods, planting trees and beautification of villages, providing assistance with school homework and mentoring children after school, public art projects for youth to express their feelings about their lives in their communities and hospital visits to the sick and elderly who may not have family, among many others.

The amazing aspect that these groups provide to youth is a shift in perspective. Kids are finding interests in life that are bigger than themselves. I hear news of kids who have improved their grades and later go on to be admitted into good colleges to study medicine, education and public health.

My task in Brafoyaw that summer 3 years ago was to work with two young men named Alex Koufie and Sammy Arthur to try to build junior youth groups in Brafoyaw, Moree Junction and Moree. I also worked with Alex and Sammy to meet with young people in order to discuss and study topics about the soul, life after death and our purpose for being here. Knowing as much as I do about the Akan cultures, I couldn't wait to participate in this.

I was sitting in the courtyard after breakfast, and Alex walked through the courtyard door with his brother Sammy. My first impression was how serious Alex was. He shows up on time, and he is always prepared. Uncle Prince introduced us and Alex was so formal. "You are welcome," he said.



He was very quiet that day until lunch, when we had fufu. Fufu is the best food that has ever been created on earth. It's plantain and cassava pounded into a dough, and eaten with soup. It fills the soul and relaxes you. It is comfort that is indescribable. I love fufu. But I'm an anomaly in Ghana because almost all white people that I have come across refuse to eat it because of the texture. Forget them - fufu is wonderful! Alex's and Sammy's eyes were huge as they watched me eat my fufu. After that, I don't think five minutes ever went by that Alex, Sammy and I weren't laughing about something.

Sammy was in the middle of getting his welding shop set up, so some days he was there and other days he was not. Alex and I worked constantly though, every day from the early morning until late at night. We'd prepare our plans for the day and then go out into the village to speak with young people. With Alex, it was easy to make connections because Alex seems to know everyone. My first impression of Alex being so serious was so far off. Alex has the gift of conversation, he knows everyone and he has an innate ability to put anyone at ease. He is so well liked and respected by everyone in each of the villages. We'd be riding in taxis and Alex would be yelling hello out the window constantly, waving at this person or that person - all of them his friends. It got so funny that I

nicknamed him Managing Director because it seemed as if he ran the villages.



Alex was raised in the customary way in which the whole extended family lives together to help with expenses and collectively raise the family's children. Alex told me there were 53 people who lived at his house. As an example of how this works, Sammy's mother is Uncle Alex's sister, so in our culture Sammy would call Uncle Alex his uncle. But in the Fante culture, Uncle Alex is also Sammy's father. Auntie Gladys, who is Uncle Alex's wife is not only Alex's biological mother but Sammy's mother as well.

What I find most impressive is how well behaved and respectful these children are, due to the constant and consistent discipline and love that they receive. They carry their weight in the family by doing chores and helping take care of the younger children. Alex, Sammy and their brother Ernest are often charged with making dinner once or twice a week to help out Auntie Gladys.

What I cherish most about this lifestyle is the sense of security that it brings. Auntie Bea once told me that a psychologist would go broke in Ghana because depression does not exist like it does in the U.S. There are always people around to keep you company and to share in carrying the weight of the burden of life along with you. It's clear in this photo how much love there is in this family. Affection in Ghana is like the air; it's everywhere and it's part of life.

Working such long hours together, Alex and I became very close. It was nice to be this uncle figure to him and to Sammy. Alex asked for my advice on anything from school, to his ideas for starting a business, and even girls.



One day at Alex's house, I asked him about what he is passionate about in life. What did he want to do for a living? He lit up with that amazing smile of his and took me out to his chicken hatchery. Alex raises chickens and guinea fowl, and he has a passion for agriculture.

Alex and Sammy had done the same thing I had done upon finishing secondary school, to give a year of service to the Baha'i community. They left home and lived in a remote village in the rain forest near Sunyani for a year to help the Baha'is there. At the end of his stay there, Alex brought back two guinea fowl chicks and raised them. Guinea fowl are beautiful. They have a smooth grey covering of feathers with a white head. They remind me of small peacocks.

Alex then took me to the side of his house where Uncle Alex had let him set up his own garden. He had *aburo* - maize, *ntoosi* - tomatoes, *anamuna* - watermelon, *mako* - pepper, *adua* - beans, *bankye* - cassava, *borof3re* - papaya and *moringa* tree seedlings. The moringa is an amazing tree that has medicinal powers, such as stewing the leaves into a tea to reduce fever and minimize the effects of malaria.

I was so impressed that this young man understood his calling in life at such an early age. He told me he had two passions in life, one was agriculture and the other was to become a teacher. Alex's connection with children is something that comes naturally to him. I watched him with the junior youth group he had set up in Moree Junction and then with another one in the town of Moree. He has an ability to inspire children to be better people.



One day Alex and I had gone into town so that I could buy a few pieces of traditional wax print cloth at a shop that has become one of my favorite places in Cape Coast. Wax print is an expression of culture through proverbs and symbols, and is used for women's traditional dresses with the apron and the *kaba* - bodice. Men also wear it in the traditional style of a toga over one shoulder. It's usually seen at church, and special occasions like weddings or funerals.

It was actually started by the Dutch in the 19th century as they were looking for inexpensive ways to mass produce *batik* cloth that uses wax and resist-dye patterns in the Dutch colony of Java. The cloth was a failure in Java but the bright colors and intricate patterns became popular in Ghana as the Dutch established trade with West African ports, selling the cloth. Soon Ghanaians adopted the technique and a cultural tradition started. The colors are beautiful, and each print tells a story. Currently covering my bed is a beautiful piece of green cloth with a pattern of sparrows flying across it. The proverb for this

design is, "money flies from the hand like a bird." Black patterns or red patterns are only worn at funerals. A mother with a new born baby wears white with a light blue pattern to signify to the community that she is carrying a newborn. I have watched men get up from their seats on buses when a woman in this cloth gets on, and sure enough she is carrying a newborn on her back in the traditional way.

I love the cloth for many reasons. I was an Graphic Design and Art major in the university and I love graphics. I love to sleep under a piece in summer because it is light and comfortable when it's warm at night. I love it because it reminds me of Nana. He took great pleasure in showing me his own patterns he designed for school, and he always asked for my opinion and advice on how to improve his patterns.

After Alex and I got done at the shop, we walked back to the taxi station. While we were talking, I asked Alex about what his plans were now that he had finished secondary school and he had done his year of service for the Baha'is. He said excitedly, "Oh, Wofa Yaw! I want to go to agricultural college to study agriculture and education! But it all depends on my grades which I am sure I have done well, and it depends on money."

I don't know if Alex noticed how quiet I had become during the taxi ride. I knew that his father's finances were tight with raising five children. I asked Alex a few questions, trying to be as sly as possible about what the tuition would cost for the college he wants to study at. When he told me, I knew I had to do something. I had just received a raise at work and I could help. This young man's future was in reach and it could either become a reality or remain a dream forever.



The taxi dropped me first at the Brafoyaw junction, and I paid the fare so that Alex could continue down the road to his house. I walked alone up the path to the road and I prayed for guidance. I felt like my heart was going to explode. I had put myself through the university to get my Bachelor of Arts and later to get my Master's Degree, working nights and going to school during the day. In the U.S., I had the means to do this. Americans do not realize the opportunities that we have in this country. If you apply yourself, you can get an education. It's difficult, but it's possible. For so many families in Ghana, an education is nothing more than a dream because the financial means just doesn't exist.

I decided to talk to Uncle Prince. I told him I could help and I know a lot about the culture, but would it be proper for me to go speak to Uncle Alex? Would it be impolite for me to bring this up to him? Would I possibly insult him? Uncle Prince told me as he patted me on the shoulder to reassure me, "Yaw, this is a wise

and blessed idea that you have. Please let me take care of this though. Don't worry, everything is going work out fine."



Several days later, Uncle Alex came to the house. I was reading in my room and Uncle Prince asked me to come, and to put on a nice shirt and some decent pants. I came out to the courtyard and I found that Uncle Prince had set up two chairs to face each other and he had a chair for himself to the side of both those chairs, I greeted Uncle Alex and Uncle Prince motioned to us to sit down and face each other, while he took the third chair in between us.

Uncle Prince took out his Baha'i prayer book and said a prayer for families. He gave a talk about the importance of family, and then he asked the Ancestors to be present at this meeting. That was when I knew what this was about - Alex's education. Uncle Prince asked each of us to introduce ourselves to each other formally, and to share a little about each of our families and histories. Uncle Prince then turned to me and asked me to speak about my purpose for calling this meeting. I told Uncle Alex that I had the ability to help with Alex's education and if he would accept my offer, we can send Alex to the college he has his hopes set on.

Uncle Alex pulled out his handkerchief, wiping his eyes and he told me that he has been laying awake at night, praying to God to find a way to send Alex to school or otherwise he would have to dash all of Alex's hopes. I could tell that the stress was almost unbearable for him because he just wanted what was best for his child. He said he had prayed for God to recognize that Alex is too fine of a young man for life to be unkind to him, and that now, finally, his prayers had been answered. Now I knew why I was supposed to come to Brafoyaw. I sat quietly, and just let Uncle Alex's tears come. Nothing else needed to be said. Uncle Prince smiled at me.

Uncle Alex asked me to make one promise. Until Alex got his official acceptance into the college, I was not to say a word to him about any of this. Uncle Alex was afraid that Alex may tell his friends in anticipation, and to save him any humiliation if he did not get accepted we could protect him by not letting him know our plans. That was one of the hardest secrets to keep during the last week of my trip!

About two or three months after I got back to Los Angeles, I was running errands

during lunch and needed to stop at the Baha'i Center. I had driven into the parking lot and was just about to shut off my car when my cell phone rang. It was Alex, and I remember thinking how strange it was that he was calling me at this time. What we do is he calls and hangs up so that I can call back, so he doesn't have to pay the charges. I called back, and Alex was so quiet. He said hello, asked how all of my family was doing, and then said, "I know. I know everything." I smiled and replied, "What exactly do you know?" He was quiet and then finally said, "I have been accepted to the college and Uncle Alex let me know what you have done for me." Alex's voice began to crack and he started to cry, saying "Wofa Yaw, you don't know what this means to me. You have no idea what this means to me." I started to cry too, and I felt something inside that I can only describe as healing. I told Alex, "No matter what, I will always be here for you."

The next day, Uncle Prince called me and told me he needed to discuss something with me, and he wanted me to have an open mind. He said that in the Fante culture, the responsibility of the Ancestors is to watch over us and to keep balance in our lives. This is consistent with everything in the Akan perspective on life, where opposites keep everything in balance. They believe in the oneness of God, but they recognize that God has two sides, *Nyame* and *Nyamewaa* - the Great God Father and the Great Goddess Mother who together constitute the Supreme Being. Disease, sickness and misfortune come from an imbalance in one's life which may be caused by disobedience to God's laws and the laws of the community, or it can be caused by external forces such as *juju* - magic. Traditionally the Fetish Priest or Priestess would make a diagnosis and then communicate with the Ancestors to formulate a prescription to bring back balance in order to relieve suffering.

Uncle Prince said that the Ancestors will right a wrong that happened in our past by giving us the greatest gift in life, which is children. These children are special - they are not born to us, but we recognize them as our children just the same. He said, "I have recognized you as such a son as my gift from the Ancestors, and for all that you have done for Alex and Sammy, the Ancestors have blessed you as well. I want you to see this. I want you to see that you are one of the Fante and that God and the Ancestors have blessed you with these two sons."

I was dumbfounded. I could have received this as a flattering gesture on his part, but it made sense. Looking at my past, this made complete sense to me. I went through everything in my past to find my truth, and now this was very real. I was accepted as one of the Fante, entrusted with its culture and history. These two boys were my gift from God and the Ancestors, and I would take on the responsibility of helping to be a father to them. I discussed this with Uncle Alex, and he agreed. He welcomed my help to guide and raise these two young men I had grown to love so much.

I have learned that the love of a father for his sons is like nothing I have ever experienced in my life. It has no ending. There is nothing conditional about it. It's like a deep well where the bottom cannot be reached. I would stand in front of a gun to protect them and sacrifice my life for them. I want their lives to be better and fuller than my own. I want only the best for them. This love has healed all of my hurt in my past, and I owe them for having provided that healing to me.

This experience has taught me what it really means to me to be a Baha'i. We believe in the oneness of mankind, and that everyone on this earth is part of the family of man. It's one thing to intellectually embrace the idea, but it is something else to experience it on such a personal level. Alex, Sammy and I speak on the phone once a week and at the end of every phone call we say, "Me do wo papaapa." This doesn't fully translate into English, but the closest it means is, "I

love you very much." One day Alex asked me why I say it every time we speak, and I told him that until very recently I had only heard my own father tell me he loved me once in my life. I vowed that if I had children of my own, they would never stop hearing me tell them.

The night after Uncle Prince told me about my gifts from the Ancestors, I had a dream about Nana. It was one of those dreams that you wake up from and you cannot for the life of you figure out if it was real or not because it seems so real. In the dream, he and I were sitting on my sofa in my loft. Nana had one arm up on the back of the sofa and he had this huge grin on his face. He didn't say anything, he just laughed and smiled. I laughed too, and finally spoke up and asked, "Did you have anything to do with me finding my way home to Ghana? Did you make this trip happen?"

He laughed again and paused, and finally said, "... maybe!"

I'll tell Sammy's story next, but before that - one more about Nana and his visits.

Posted by Dennis Hunter at 12:05 PM No comments:

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THURSDAY, JULY 5, 2012

On Becoming a Son



"Oh, this is very fine. Akwaaba! You are welcome! You must be very tired after your journey from Accra. Please come in!" I walked through the gate of Uncle Prince's house with

Akwasi, and we were greeted by the whole family including Auntie Aggie his wife, Jennifer and Araba their nieces and Anis Paa Kwesi their grand nephew. Their son David, named after David Tanyi who I had previously written about, lives a half hour drive west in Takoradi with his wife Naomi and their new baby Naana Esi. As is the custom, Jennifer and Araba took off with my suitcase to my room to get me situated, while Akwasi and I were invited to sit in the courtyard to rest our feet, drink some cold water and eat a meal.

The thing that I love the most about Uncle Prince is his honoring of traditions. He speaks so eloquently, as if he is reciting poetry. In Ghana, one of the highest stations in a community is that of a teacher, so his words really touched my heart.

"We want to welcome you to our humble family. We don't have much but we will exert every effort to make you comfortable so that you can enjoy your stay with us, while you honor our home with your presence here as a teacher of the blessed Baha'i Faith."

I had done my homework before I left the U.S. Uncle Prince Abaidoo has an incredible history with building the Baha'i community in Ghana. I was the one who was honored.

The Baha'i communities have an elected body that I previously described called the National Spiritual Assembly, but there is also an appointed body that serves to help both the expansion of the Baha'i community and education of its believers. We call this the Continental Board of Counselors and their support network called the Auxiliary Board - one board to assist with promulgation and one to assist with education and protection.

Currently there are 14 Auxiliary Board Members to cover all 10 regional states in Ghana. Uncle Prince discovered the Baha'i Faith in 1969 through an old friend Ernest Bentil. The community was so young that he was soon elected to serve on the National Spiritual Assembly and then was appointed to serve as the Auxiliary Board Member for both promulgation and protection for the entire country of Ghana. He bought a motorcycle and rode it all over Ghana to visit the Baha'is.

One of the unique, if not revolutionary, tenants of the Baha'i Faith is that we respect and uphold each of our cultures as being something sacred and to be honored. This is contrary to most experiences with religion, whereby practitioners are expected to lose their cultures, traditional ways and even ways of dressing in order to become a practitioner. Historically African cultures were coerced through either fear, intimidation or even through tactics such education for children - provided that the child's family gave up its own identity to practice the imposing religious dogma.

Baha'is do not proselytize, nor do we accept money from people who are not Baha'is. It is the responsibility of each of us to let people know through discourse and the sharing of ideas what we believe in. There is no monetary compensation. We do this out of love for mankind.

Cultures in Ghana are not relaxed and informal like here in the U.S. I remember in 1982, Auntie Bea assigned me to be responsible for a road outside of Kumasi that had five villages in a row, all with young Baha'i communities. Each Saturday or Sunday I would take a Tro-Tro and visit each of the villages, serving as a resource for these Baha'is so that they could learn more about their new faith.

In order to take on this responsibility, I had to learn the Asante culture. Nana was the one who taught me how to enter a village and appropriately seek permission to be a visitor in the community. He taught me to first approach the chief's house and inquire if I could speak with the chief. I did not move from the path until I was invited into the chief's compound. The chief would then send out his linguist to the courtyard where I would be seated.

A linguist is the spokesperson for the chief. It is considered beneath the chief's royal stature to speak directly to his subjects or to strangers who do not come from royalty. The role of the linguist is to speak on behalf of the chief with his authority. What is fascinating is that the linguists come from familial lineage to fill this role in the community. From a young age, boys are selected from within the family of a linguist to be trained in the eloquence of the language. They speak perfect Twi. The Akans admire the spoken word, story-telling and the gift of speech.

The linguist would ask me my purpose for being there after he shook hands with me. I was then welcomed by the linguist who would then disappear. Soon after, a group of 25 to 50 elders of the village would gather, each bringing a chair and

sitting in a circle in the chief's courtyard. I would then restate my purpose for my visit, and the linguist would pour libation on the ground, an offering of water to the spirit of *Asaase Afua* - Mother Earth - and to invite the *Nananom Nsamanfo* - the Ancestors who are the souls of those who have passed on to the next world and watch out for us. The Ancestors' presence was to officiate my meeting.

The last step was for me to stand up and one by one, shake hands with each person sitting in the circle. When finished, I would then shake hands with each person again in the opposite direction as each would welcome me with *akwaaba*, as this would signify the village welcoming me into the community.

If someone went into a setting like this not knowing the nuanced customs, the potential to insult the chief and the elders was likely, to the point that one would never be welcomed again. Just among the Akan people, there were so many other customs to know as well. Never shake hands, reach for food or hand money to someone using your left hand. It is considered insulting and unclean. Always address an older person as *Wofa* or *Sewaa* - Uncle or Auntie - and never by their first name alone because this is incredibly disrespectful. When invited to a meal, eat everything you are offered, because if you don't - you insult the cook. Greet anyone who passes you on the street, and be kind and welcoming to strangers who stop to greet you and welcome you to Ghana. When greeting a friend, always inquire about the health of their family and their children before discussing anything else. If anyone knocks on the door, invite them in and have them sit down. Offer a glass of water and welcome them to the home. Then inquire about the reason for their visit.

Imagine the task Uncle Prince faced, knowing that in order to be able to reach out and share this message with strangers, and in order to help deepen new Baha'is throughout the country he'd need to learn the other Akan cultures beside his own Fante culture, as well as the Ewe culture in the southeast part of Ghana, and tens of cultures in the north of Ghana like the Hausa, Dagomba, Kusase and many others. This is no easy task, but vital in order to be able to visit a village and share this message with people. Not only did he learn, he mastered the cultures. I can sit for hours and listen to Uncle Prince tell me stories of all the places he visited on his motorcycle. His life inspires me to learn more and to better understand the people of this country.

I remember once being in a village with a Baha'i friend named Kwame Sarpong. He also studied engineering at KNUST with us. Kwame was kind and quiet, and had such a peaceful soul. We had gone to visit some of the Baha'i friends in a remote village outside of Kumasi heading north. Since the trip was long, we knew we would stay the night and come back the next evening. When we got there, we were given a room in one of the mud huts, with a dirt floor and a bed. We had an oil lamp to light the room.

There was a knock on the door, and the wife of our host and her mother came in, crouching down carrying pots of food for us. The custom is that out of respect for a visitor, it is impolite to enter a room with your head being higher than that of the guest. For the most part, the villagers are farmers who work long hours doing strenuous work to maintain their crops, so they eat big meals. That night we had *nkontumrie* - cocoa yam leaves like collard greens with fish, *bayere* - white yams like potatoes, and *kokoo* - boiled ripe plantain. And you eat with your fingers, which helps make it taste so good. The food in Ghana is soul food and I cannot fully describe my connection to it. They love pepper with food, and the cooking reminds me of that feeling of being at my grandma's on Sunday afternoons - food made with love and soul. It's not surprising that southern cooking in the U.S. is so similar to Ghanaian food. Women torn away from their families, sold into slavery and stripped of their cultures and histories were

forced to cook for the families that enslaved them. They drew on what little they had left from their past in order to survive.

That night so as to not insult our hosts, Kwame and I ate every bite and there was enough food for 4 people. We laid awake in that room, rubbing our bellies and praying for relief. But it was sweet pain. There's nothing better than a full stomach.

Each night at Uncle Prince's house after dinner, we sit under his mango tree where the breeze comes through or in the courtyard until very late at night, just talking. He loves to hear stories about my hometown San Diego. In turn, he tells me stories of the history of Ghana and how he became a Baha'i when you could count the number of Baha'is on one hand.

He rode that motorcycle all over Ghana. He's told me many stories of being away from home for weeks at a time as he visited, encouraged and educated the Baha'is throughout the country. Riding his motorcycle while getting beaten by the rain, on treacherous dirt roads filled with pot holes and mud in the rain forest in order to get to fledgling Baha'i communities in Techiman, Sunyani and Wenchi. Following the custom in the north of Ghana, sleeping on the roofs of houses to get away from the heat, while visiting the Baha'is in Tamale, Bolgatanga and Bawku. Taking the dangerous water Tro-Tro ferries across the Volta Lake to visit the friends in Kpando, Biakpa and Ho in the Ewe land of eastern Ghana.



Now that Uncle Prince is retired, he spends much more time at home in Brafoyaw. My room at Uncle Prince's house is simple, but I love it for its simplicity. In the morning at dawn, I lay in bed under my mosquito net and covered with my piece of waxprint cloth, listening to the world come to life. Thousands of song birds singing, Auntie Aggie's

pet chickens clucking and scratching in the yard, Araba's broom sweeping the courtyard and walkways, the Call to Prayer from the mosque, the laughter of the farmers on the terraced plots in the valley below Uncle Prince's house, children singing and playing *ampe* before school starts next door to the house. It's magical. There is something about it all that confirms hope for me. It's my glimpse of how good the world can be.

Uncle Prince is a treasure to the Baha'is of Ghana, and he is history. He has lived through some of the roughest times, and the good times too. He never stops thinking about the future of mankind, and what we Baha'is have committed to do - to establish peace on this earth and to stop the suffering of mankind by building a new world. Uncle Prince was there when there were so few Baha'is. And now he is living in a Ghana where the children of the youth I went to the university with are now adults, sending their children to Baha'i children's classes. Uncle Prince is a legacy and he endures.

And what I cherish the most about him is that he is also my father.

A few days before that first trip ended and I had to fly back to the U.S., Uncle Prince sat me down and said to me, "Yaw - you are not like any other American

visitor we have had come to stay with us. You speak our language. You know our culture. You don't require so much attention. You are so comfortable here and you ask for nothing. Auntie Aggie says she does not have to fuss over you about food - she says you eat everything she makes and you enjoy it." I smiled. It made my heart feel good to hear this. And then he said this, and I will never forget it. "Yaw, I think God made a small mistake and you were born in the wrong place. But isn't it wonderful that He has helped you find your way home to us? You are my son. Yes, you are my son. I pray that you will come back. And every time you come, it will not be to visit, it will be to come home. You will always have a home here with us."

And that's how the second part of my life started. And if you think it cannot possibly get better than this, it does.

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